DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 339 771 UD 028 437

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TITLE Dropout Prevention at the Grassroots: Houston ISD's Elementary At-Risk Program (1990-91).
PUB DATE Jul 91
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Attendance; Counseling; *Dropout Prevention; Dropout Programs; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; Guidance; *High Risk Students; Outreach Programs; *Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation; School Districts; School Holding Power; *Self Esteem; Student Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Houston Independent School District TX

ABSTRACT

The Elementary At-Risk Program was an intensive counseling, guidance, community outreach, and family case-management support system for a selected group of acutely at-risk students (approximately 60 students at one level and 180 students at another) in eight Houston (Texas) Independent School District (ISD) elementary schools. Social worker services were the central feature of the support system, which was designed to provide a supportive and nurturing home and school environment in which the academic and affective problems of the students could be effectively addressed, thereby giving them the disciplinary temperament and resolve to appreciate learning, stay in school, and improve their academic performance. This report evaluates the effectiveness of the program in improving student self-esteem, attitude toward school, class attendance rates, and academic performance. The concurrent and multiple measures of program efficacy included social worker evaluations, teacher assessments, attitude surveys, self-esteem scores, class attendance rates, and standardized test scores of program students. Findings indicate that the program was instrumental in improving students' self-esteem and attitude toward school. Attendance rates and academic performance indicators did not show any improvements. Statistical data are provided in five tables and three figures. A 14-item list of references is included. (Author/SLD)

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# DROPOUT PREVENTION AT THE GRASSROOTS: HOUSTON ISD'S ELEMENTARY AT-RISK PROGRAM (1990-91)

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## ABSTRACT

*The Elementary At-Risk program was an intensive counseling, guidance, community outreach, and family case-management support system for a selected group of acutely at-risk students in eight Houston ISD elementary schools. Social worker services were the central feature of the support system. The program was designed to provide a supportive and nurturing home and school environment in which the academic and affective problems of program students could be effectively addressed, thereby giving them the disciplinary temperament and resolve to appreciate learning, stay in school, and improve their academic performance. This report evaluates the effectiveness of the program in improving student self-esteem, attitude toward school, class attendance rates and academic performance. The concurrent and multiple measures of program efficacy included social worker evaluations, teacher assessments, attitude surveys, self-esteem scores, class attendance rates, and standardized test scores of program students. The findings of this study indicate that the program was instrumental in improving the students' self-esteem and attitude toward school. Attendance rates and academic performance indicators did not show any improvements.*

## INTRODUCTION

As educators grapple with the high dropout rates among the nation's at-risk high school students, many point their fingers at the primary school level as the place where the seeds of academic and attitudinal deficiencies, that surface at the high school level, are sown. By the time the at-risk student reaches the secondary school level, not only is he or she academically handicapped, but in most instances, is also devoid of the attitudinal resilience and resolve needed to overcome the seemingly unsurmountable academic handicaps. The formative years—when the elementary student begins to mould and solidify his values about school, drugs, and many adverse but tempting habits—are the worst times for the student to be facing dysfunctional home environments. The adverse impact of many dysfunctional home environments and parenting practices on student conduct and academic performance have been well documented in the research literature (Walberg, 1984; Etzioni, 1984; Baumrind, 1987). In the words of Pauline B. Gough:

> *Trying to educate the young without the help and support from the home is akin to trying to rake leaves in a high wind (Gough, 1991).*

Consequently, many dropout prevention programs have been implemented by many school districts across the nation for at-risk students at the elementary level. Examples of such programs include the Parent Training Program in Memphis, Tennessee, which began in

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1985 for at-risk students in ten elementary schools, and the Education Sunday Program in San Diego, California, where ministers, parents, and educators share the pulpit one Sunday in February to discuss how parents can be involved in their children's schooling (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1987).

In unison with the pioneering efforts of other school districts, the guidance and counseling department of Houston ISD has implemented a multiplicity of programs at the elementary school level, designed to help students develop the attitude and resilience for coping with the factors or problems that render them at-risk for dropping out of school. Examples of such programs include Project DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) and Project SAFE[1]. In the continuing search for better strategies for addressing the problems and needs of at-risk elementary students, the Elementary At-Risk Program was started in eight schools during the 1989-90 school year. This program has introduced into the elementary school level the services and expertise of social workers in a pioneering effort to help find effective solutions to the many student problems that continue to undermine the effectiveness of the inner city schools.

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

### The STAR Model[2]

The Elementary At-Risk program was based on the STAR model, which is a guidance and counseling intervention and prevention support system for at-risk students and their parents. The STAR model is a school-based support system with community outreach and family case-management components. The model postulates a philosophy of prevention cum intervention that addresses the actual and potential needs of the at-risk student from a holistic perspective, by helping to resolve dysfunctionalities in the student's home environment, simultaneously with school-based curricular strategies. The premise of the model is that the home environment of values, parenting frameworks, educational successes or failures, community-resource awareness, and intra-family relationships critically affect: (a) the student's predisposition to academic success or failure, and (b) the capability of the school to reduce or eradicate the factors that render the student at-risk. The model works within a collaborative staffing framework of school counselors, teachers, and social workers.

*Roles of STAR Staff*

The counselors conduct individualized and group counseling and guidance sessions commensurate with the needs of the at-risk students. Activities include after-school clubs and group guidance sessions on study skills, test-taking skills, goal-setting skills, self-esteem, motivation, decision-making, career awareness, coping skills, peer pressure reversal, drug abuse prevention, child abuse prevention, and interpersonal relationship skills.

The teachers collaborate with the counselors and social workers in: (a) identifying stu-

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[1] The project is designed to help prevent physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of children and also make the home environment safe for "latchkey" students.

[2] Students and Teachers Achieving Results (STAR) was designed by the HISD Guidance and Counseling Department.

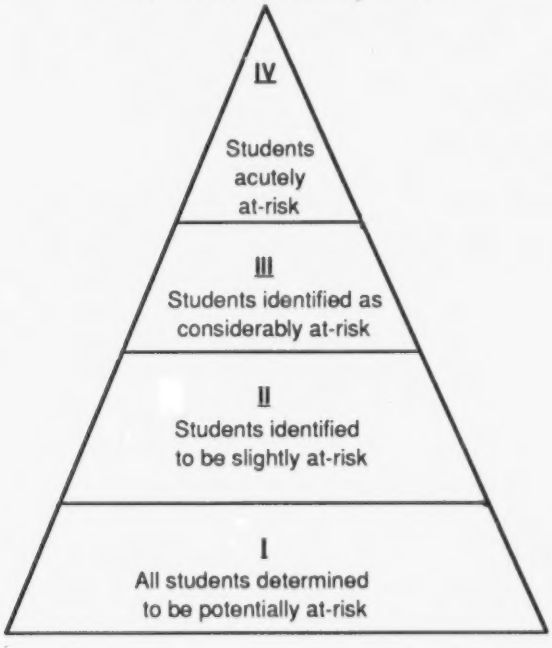
dents for program services, and (b) facilitating the opportunity for the program students to receive guidance, counseling, and case management support services from the counselors or social workers. Additionally, the teachers support the program by infusing high expectations and incentives into curricular activities to facilitate the development of a nurturing and a motivating environment for the at-risk students.

The social workers provide guidance, counseling, family case-management, and community outreach support services for the at-risk students and their families. They work with the families to find effective ways for addressing the factors that render their children at-risk. They provide guidance support to parents by making them aware of public and private community resources that can be used to address the factors that render their children at-risk. Many specialized strategies, such as student and parent contracts and incentives, are adopted by the social workers.

*STAR At-Risk Pyramid*

The model provides a classificatory framework that places all identified at-risk or potentially at-risk students into four ascending levels commensurate with the extent to which they are at-risk (Figure 1). Activities for program students are custom tailored to fit each of the levels. The most acutely at-risk (i.e. Level 4), are case-managed by the social workers. As intervention activities reduce a student's level of "at-riskness" he or she is placed at the next lower level of the pyramid. Besides the intervention activities, at-risk students at levels 1—3 also participate in prevention activities that help them to develop the temperament and attitudinal resilience to overcome the factors that could engender their being escalated into higher levels of the pyramid.

Figure 1
The STAR At-Risk Pyramid



*STAR Student Referral Process*

When a teacher observes that a Level 2 student appears to be considerably or acutely at-risk, he or she refers the student to the STAR counselor for assessment. Upon receipt of the referral, the counselor assesses the student and confers with the two other members of the Campus STAR Committee (i.e. a teacher and the principal), to determine whether the student should be placed on a higher level of the at-risk pyramid. If the committee decides to place the student at level 3, he or she is assigned to the STAR counselor, who ensures that the student receives appropriate STAR support services. However, if the student's extent of at-riskness is determined to warrant that he or she is placed at Level 4 of the pyramid, then a referral is made to the STAR social worker for case-management and community support services if necessary.

## Program Implementation

*Program Administration*

The program was implemented under the leadership of the Director of Guidance and Counseling and the Director of Elementary Counseling. The directors organized periodic meetings with the two social workers of the program in order to learn about their problems and discuss strategies for resolving them. The directors helped to instill in the program staff the collaborative spirit of understanding and communication needed for ensuring program success.

*Program Students*

The program served eight elementary schools which had a combined enrollment of 4579 students. On the basis of Texas Education Agency (TEA) criteria for identifying students at-risk, 1465 students were determined to be at-risk in the program schools. A breakdown of this at-risk figure as proportions of the enrollment figures for the respective schools is shown below (Table 1).

Table 1
Percent of Enrollment At-Risk in Program Schools

| Schools | Enrollment | % At-Risk |
|---|---|---|
| Carnegie Elementary | 489 | 35% |
| Chatham Elementary | 417 | 37% |
| Kashmere Elementary | 566 | 28% |
| Frost Elementary | 730 | 40% |
| McDade Elementary | 730 | 24% |
| Milam Elementary | 513 | 27% |
| Reynolds Elementary | 593 | 30% |
| Shearn Elementary | 541 | 32% |
| **Total Enrollment** | 4579 | 32% |

The following is a list of the TEA at-risk criteria: low reading level of approximately two years below grade level on a standardized achievement test such as MAT-6, retentions, overage (more than one year), high absentee/ tardy rates, Limited English Proficiency (LEP), and low standardized test scores.

In addition to the TEA criteria, the following were added to facilitate the identification of at-risk students eligible for placement at levels 3 and 4 of the At-Risk Pyramid: low motivation, referred but did not qualify for Special Education, drug and alcohol abuse problems, adverse changes in family circumstances, sudden drop in grades, free and reduced lunch, behavior/discipline problems, perceived by school staff as potential dropout, reported or suspected suicidal tendencies, and Kindergarten Screening results.

*Social Worker Services*

Each of the two social workers was responsible for working with all the level 4 students in four schools. Each social worker was responsible for seven or eight level 4 students from each of the program schools. Overall, each social worker worked with 30 Level 4 students during the school year. Through weekly visitations with each Level 4 student at school, home visitations, and telephone contacts, the social workers established conducive and productive relationships with parents and teachers of the students. A full work-day was allotted to each school every week to ensure that each Level 4 student received pertinent support services in a timely manner.

The social work services were custom designed to address the unique needs of each Level 4 student with the purpose of reducing or eradicating the factors or dysfunctionalities that had rendered the students severely at-risk. The social workers referred many parents and students to governmental and private agencies that provide services pertinent to their specific circumstances. On several occasions, the social workers had to help transport some parents who had no means of transportation to various appointments.

*School Counselor Services*

The school counselors at the respective eight schools met with all the level 3 and 4 students through individual counseling sessions, support group sessions, and classroom presentations. Six schools had these counseling support sessions weekly. One school had twice weekly sessions, while another school had monthly sessions. Topics that were addressed during the sessions and presentations included the following: self-esteem, study skills, test-taking skills, physical and sexual abuse, cleanliness, self-discipline, honesty, getting along with others, peer pressure, planning for the future, survival skills, feelings and self expression, home safety, anger control, social skills, motivation, choosing friends, and constructive attitudes.

*Program Cost*

The total cost of the Elementary At-Risk program was $100,000 for the 1990-91 school year. A breakdown of the total cost is as follows: (a) staff salaries & fringe benefits, $76,469; (b) purchased & contracted services, $1,000; (c) testing materials, student incentive & counseling supplies, $19,531; (d) other operating expenses $3,000.

## RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODS

The specific tasks of this inquiry were to:

- describe the conceptual framework on which the Elementary At-Risk Program is based;
- describe the implementation activities of the Elementary At-Risk program;
- assess the impact of the program on student self-esteem, attitude toward school, class attendance rates, and academic performance.

### Sample

On the basis of the criteria used by the Texas Education Agency for identifying at-risk students, 1447 students were determined to be at-risk in the eight program schools. This figure represented 32 percent of the combined enrollment of 4579 students. Out of the 1447 students, who were initially placed on Level 2 of the At-Risk Pyramid, 240 students were identified—thirty from each school—for placement at Level 3. Sixty out of the 240 Level 3 students were placed on Level 4 of the pyramid. Only students in Level 3 and 4 were used in the determination of program efficacy. Since the central feature of the Elementary At-Risk Program was the services of the social workers, the students who received social worker services (Level 4 ) served as the program students (i.e. experimental group), while the Level 3 students served as the comparison group for this quasi-experimental study.

### Procedure

As professor Norma Radin[3], has correctly observed, the assessment of social work services in schools is *"a topic that presents enormous difficulty"* (Radin, 1979). She proposes that one or more of the following could be used to address the problem.

> *seven modalities can be used to assess the attainment of objectives of school social work: (1) questionnaires (structured and semi-structured), (2) observations, (3) interviews, (4) rating scales, (5) tests, (6) self reports [i.e. by the social workers], and (7) hard data, such as attendance records and grades...The seven modalities described above can be used to assess the following three major criteria of effective practice in social work: (1) improved attitudes and feelings of the targets of the intervention, (2) improved views of significant others concerning these targets, and (3) indices of competent functioning of the target individuals (Radin, 1979).*

In view of the preceding perspectives, and the need for feedback data for program refinement, the following instruments and methods were used to obtain pertinent data to facilitate the determination of program effectiveness, program implementation characteristics, and recommendations for program refinement.

*The Coppersmith Self-Esteem Inventory*

The instrument was used to assess the impact of the program on the self-esteem of program students (Level 4 students).

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[3] A professor at the School of Social Work, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

*Student Attitude Survey*

The instrument was used to assess the impact of the program on the attitudes of students in Level 4. The administration of this survey was supplemented with the interviewing of 34% of the program students. Domains of interest included student attitudes toward learning and teachers.

*Teacher Perception Survey*

The students in Level 4 were assessed with this instrument by their teachers, since in most instances it was the same teachers who had referred such students to the respective campus STAR Committees for assessment and assignment to one of the social workers. The purpose of the survey was to find out from teachers if they had seen any changes in the behavior, conduct, or attitudes of the Level 4 students, by the end of the 1990-91 school year, that could be attributed to the program.

*Social Worker Survey*

The students in Level 4 were assessed with this instrument by the social workers. The purpose was to determine their perceptions of how effective they have been in resolving the problems that had rendered their students acutely at-risk.

*Counselor/Social Worker Interviews*

The domains of interest were: (a) major strengths and weaknesses of the program; and (b) recommendations for resolving the weaknesses, or improving the effectiveness of the program.

**Data Analysis**

The descriptive analysis focused on: (1) the impact of the program on student attitudes toward school and their teachers; (2) program strengths and weaknesses; and (3) program personnel recommendations for program refinement. Statistical Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to compare the Level 4 and the Level 3 students on the basis of their self-esteem scores, attendance rates, and Metropolitan Achievement Test Sixth Edition (MAT-6) scores. Additionally, Paired Student "t" test was used to assess the significance of changes in attendance rates, self-esteem, and MAT-6 scores of the program students between 1990 spring and 1991 spring.

**Limitations of the Study**

Approximately 60 program students (Level 4) were compared to 180 Level 3 students (a reasonably adequate comparison group) in the statistical analyses. However, the actual numbers of students in each group varied from one analysis to the other since all the students did not have scores in all the pertinent domains of interest. For example, 42 program students were assessed with the Student Attitude Survey, since 13 students were either absent, had withdrawn, or transferred from their respective schools on the days the survey was administered. Furthermore, five first graders or Kindergarteners were exempted from participation in the attitude survey because of their inability to fully comprehend some of the items on the survey.

## FINDINGS

### SOCIAL WORKER ASSESSMENTS OF PROGRAM EFFICACY

The social workers identified several behavioral, psychological, and academic characteristics as problems which facilitated the escalation of previous Level 3 students to Level 4. Most of the program students (i.e. Level 4 group) had multiple problems which placed them in more than one of the categories depicted on Table 2. Approximately twenty percent of the Level 4 students had one of the following problems: their academic performance was far below expectations, they consistently failed to complete class assignments and homework, or they had problems with personal hygiene and grooming.

Table 2
Problems of Program Students (Level 4)

| *Problems of Students When Referral was Received by Social Worker* | *% of Level 4 Group* |
|---|---|
| Disruptive Behavior, Temper tantrums, or Excessive Fights | 37% |
| Depressed, Very Low/Poor Self Concept, Withdrawn or High Anxiety | 26% |
| Curses, "Talks Back", Disrespectful or Verbally Abusive to Teachers | 21% |
| Very Selfish, Poor Social Skills, or Difficulty Getting Along With Peers | 18% |
| Curses, Verbally or Physically Abusive to Other Students | 16% |
| Inability to Concentrate, Short Attention Span, or Hyperactive | 14% |
| Grieving, Death or Terminal Illness or Imprisonment of a Parent, brother,etc. | 12% |
| Defiant of Rules, Suspicion of Drug Abuse or Gang Involvement | 12% |
| Excessive Absences From School | 9% |

Many educators are convinced that it is these psychological, attitudinal, and academic problems at the elementary level that later lead to the more pronounced deficiencies which engender the high dropout rates at the secondary school level. Such discipline problems also adversely affect teacher retention rates. A recent survey of teachers by the Education Department's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) revealed that incidents of disruptive behavior have become such a problem for teachers that 29% of the teachers polled indicated that *"they have seriously considered leaving teaching"* as a result (Report on Education Research, 1987). Resolving such problems at the elementary school level is therefore an intervention strategy which, in the long term, could be regarded retrospectively as an appropriate prevention strategy.

An evaluation by the social workers of the effectiveness of their efforts in resolving the problems that characterized the Level 4 students on a scale of 0%—100% indicated an overall mean success rate of 80%. Table 3 shows the extent to which the social workers were effective in working with the parents, teachers, and counselors to resolve the problems that characterized the Level 4 students.

Table 3
Problem Resolution Success Rate (N=57)

| *Effectiveness Range* | *Number of Level 4 Students* | *Percent of Level 4 Students* |
|---|---|---|
| 90%—100% | 22 | 39% |
| 80%—89% | 13 | 23% |
| 70%—79% | 11 | 11% |
| 60%—69% | 6 | 10% |
| 50%—59% | 5 | 5% |

In the opinion of the social workers the support they provided has made significant differences in the lives of most of the program students. In the words of one of the social workers:

> *Many [students] need positive feedback and support at home but do not get it. Some parents had to be taught some parenting skills and an appreciation of the need to provide emotionally supportive home environment for their kids. Some parents seemed to have given up on life, while a few struggled to survive, not knowing that there were many free or almost free community resources they could tap to make life easier for themselves and their kids. Many had heard about such resources but didn't know how to access them. A few others seemed to feel that nobody cared, and only needed a little push to better their living conditions and perceptions about school and their children's education.*

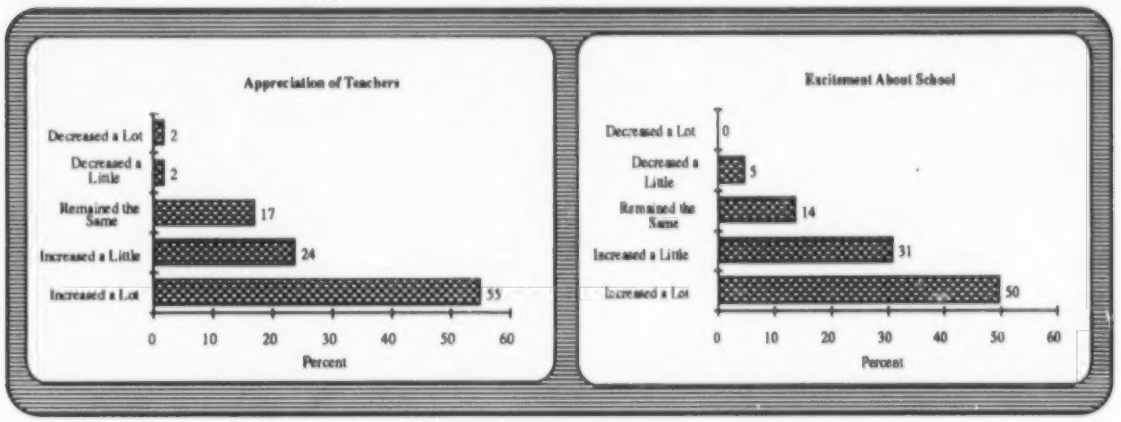
The social workers further indicated that several at-risk students in two of the program schools had immigrant parents whose knowledge of the English language, community resources, and opportunities, was seemingly limited. In their opinion, the provision of support for such families not only made conditions better at home for the student, but also helped the student to cope with school expectations.

It was however emphasized by the social workers that it was sometimes very difficult for some parents to open up and be receptive to the support that was being provided for them. There was, for example, the case of a program student with a very low self-esteem who was exceedingly self-conscious about his mouth. The social worker realized that the student needed major dental work in order to improve his speech and self-esteem. However, the mother made many promises and worked with the social worker to set up several appointments that she did not follow through.

## CHANGES IN STUDENT ATTITUDES

As Figure 2 portrays, the program students experienced a substantial improvement in the extent to which they felt excited about school and appreciated their teachers. Students who feel excited about school and appreciate their teachers are likely to commit themselves to learning activities and expectations, respect their teachers, and abide by their rules of discipline.

Figure 2
Changes in Student Attitude Toward School




More than 95% of the 42 program students, who were interviewed during the administration of the Student Attitude Survey, expressed how much conditions at school had changed for the better for them. The only complaint that many of the first grade students mentioned was the fact that schoolwork was becoming harder and that they wished they could go to the playground more often. With the exception of seven students, the students who were interviewed did not know that the interviews were conducted in connection with the social work services they had been receiving. During an interview with one level 4 fifth grader, who used to have excessive absences, and had been very depressed over the illness and death of her mother, the student expressed the following:

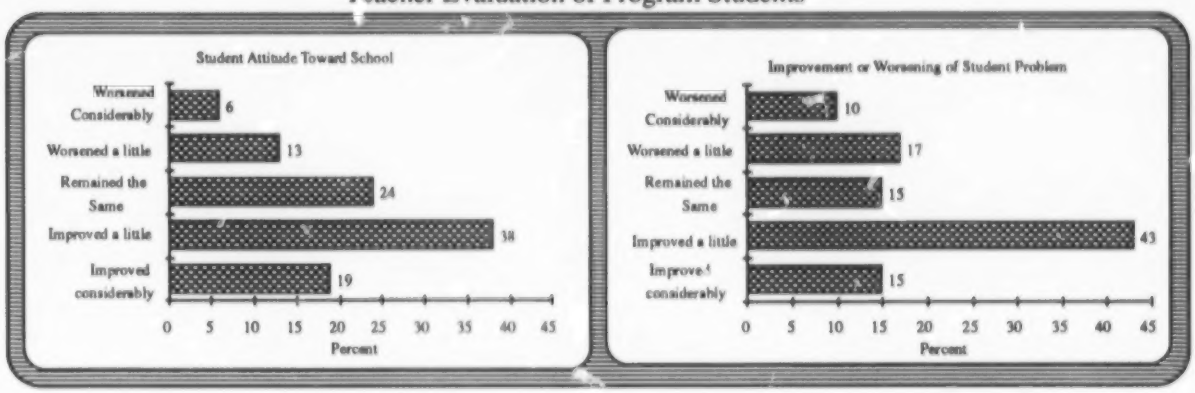
> *School is very important to me because if there were no schools people will be dumb and life will be difficult for them. Last year in my previous school I felt bored and tired. School was not fun for me. I was absent from classes a lot . I felt the staff did not like me. But this year in this school the staff seem to care about me and want to help me. I like school here much better and have many good friends.*

A review of the Social Worker Survey data previously submitted to the researcher indicated that this student's problems were effectively resolved, since the social worker had rated her effectiveness in helping this student as 100%. When the survey form that had been used by her social worker to evaluate the student was identified, it had the following comments on it : *"[the] student seems to be adapting to her mother's death very well. She has adequate emotional support from me, the school staff, and her aunt".*

## Teacher Assessments of Program Efficacy

The return rate of the Teacher Survey was 84%. Each of the program students was assessed by a classroom teacher, who had known and observed the student throughout the 1990-91 school year. Some teachers had known some of the students for more than one year. Overall, Figure 3 shows that 57% of the students experienced an improvement in their attitude toward school, while 58% experienced improvements in the problem that had rendered them acutely at-risk to warrant the services of the social workers. Comparatively, 19% of the students experienced a deterioration in their attitude toward school, while 17% suffered a worsening of the problems that rendered them acutely at-risk.

Figure 3
Teacher Evaluation of Program Students




Teacher comments on the survey forms were positive and indicated expressions of appreciation and relief. One teacher commented on a third grade student as follows:

> *He gets angry very easily and refuses to cooperate in any way. He sometimes take his anger out on other boys and girls. Yet I have seen a lot of improvement since the beginning of this year. Things were horrible at the beginning.*

Another teacher's comments on one first grade student were as follows:

> *Lavanda's positive progress is due primarily to the fact that Mrs. Cantu (the social worker) is able to help her see a new and better person in herself.*[4]

Amid the many positive comments were a few that depicted the problematic nature of some of the cases that were managed by the social workers. The following description by a teacher is an example of such comments. According to the teacher, this first grade student's problem "worsened considerably" during the school year.

> *John has an extremely short attention span. Work has been shortened for him but on some days he refuses to even pick up a pencil...He is very immature and doesn't even attempt to try. His fighting has caused many problems; he not only fights students but also teachers. John will and tries to tear the entire room apart. The aide works one -on-one with him daily.*

The Social Worker Survey form that had been used to assess this student had the following comments on it:

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[4] The names of the student and the social worker have been changed to ensure anonymity

*The student was referred for medication to help with his hyperactive behavior. He has a great deal of previous problems that may have contributed to his behavior. The student was born not breathing, had a blow to the head and drank gasoline at early infancy. Mother and step father have poor to no parenting skills and do not follow through with recommendations [from social worker].*

## PROGRAM IMPACT ON THE SELF-ESTEEM AND ATTENDANCE RATES OF PROGRAM STUDENTS

### Self-Esteem

The term self-esteem is defined by the author of the Self-Esteem Inventory instrument used in this study as "*the evaluation a person makes, and customarily maintains , of him- or herself; that is overall self-esteem is an expression of approval or disapproval, indicating the extent to which a person believes him- or herself competent, successful, significant, and worthy. Self-esteem is a personal judgement of worthiness expressed in the attitudes a person holds toward the self* (Coopersmith, 1981). The Analysis of Covariance summary on Table 4 indicates that the self-esteem of students who received social worker services was significantly higher than that of the students who did not.

Table 4
Self-Esteem Scores & Attendance Rates
ANCOVA of Independent and Dependent Variables

| Domain | Group (Size) | 1990 Observed Group Mean | 1991 Observed Group Mean | 1991 Adjusted Group Mean | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Self-Esteem | Level 4 (n=27) | 60.3 | 70.5 | 70.1 | 12.917* |
| | Level 3 (n=47) | 58.9 | 58.9 | 59.1 | |
| Attendance | Level 4 (n=61) | 95.3 | 93.0 | 92.8 | 4.910* |
| Rate | Level 3 (n=173) | 94.7 | 94.17 | 94.3 | |

* *P<.001.*

A paired student t-test between the self-esteem pre- and post-test scores of the program students (i.e. 1990 observed and 1991 observed mean scores) revealed that there was a statistically significant improvement in the self-esteem of the program students (t-value, 4.69; p <.001).

### Class Attendance Rates

The 1989-90 and 1990-91 mean attendance rates of the program students indicate a decline from 95.3%—93%. The data analysis shows that students in the comparison group had a better and statistically significant attendance rate than the program students, even though the group mean declined marginally from 94.7%—94.17%.

## PROGRAM IMPACT ON THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF PROGRAM STUDENTS

Table 5
MAT-6 Mean Normal Curve Equivalence (NCE) Scores
ANCOVA of Independent and Dependent Variables

| Domain | Group (Size) | 1990 Observed Group Mean | 1991 Observed Group Mean | 1991 Adjusted Group Mean | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total Lang. | Level 4 (n=42) | 49.12 | 48.97 | 47.16 | 0.471 (n.s.) |
| | Level 3 (n=112) | 42.42 | 44.75 | 45.43 | |
| Total Math | Level 4 (n=42) | 47.33 | 44.55 | 42.83 | 0.215 (n.s.) |
| | Level 3 (n=112) | 41.40 | 43.38 | 44.02 | |
| Total Comp. | Level 4 (n=40) | 44.49 | 44.28 | 41.89 | 0.394 (n.s.) |
| Battery | Level 3 (n=103) | 37.12 | 39.55 | 40.45 | |

* *P<.001.*

A review of the MAT-6 test scores (Table 5) indicates that there were no statistically significant differences in academic performance between the program students and the comparison group of students.

## PROGRAM STAFF OBSERVATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

### Program Strengths

Several observations were made by the school counselors who had worked collaboratively with the social workers throughout the year. All the counselors had positive comments on the program. Many expressed that the home environment had until now been the unexamined but vital component of the instructional delivery system. One counselor indicated that the program has provided effective contacts with the homes of students, which has helped them to discover dysfunctionalities that undermine their effort to educate the child. It was indicated that even if the home problem of the student could not be resolved, teachers and counselors were, at least, able to understand the student better and know what alternative support systems could be used to help the student. According to one of the counselors:

> *If the social worker were not here I would still be working closely with the Level 4 students. However, with the social worker here, I had more time to help more students. Besides, if I worked with the Level 4 students I wouldn't have been able*

*to devote as much attention to them as was provided by the social worker. Furthermore there was a lot of important information about the homes of students that we could never have known through the occasional parental visits to the school during Fail Safe days or discipline-related conferences. We now have lots of parent input because of the social worker one-on-one contact with the home.*

Another counselor further expressed the following:

*one major strength is the personality, the willingness and drive of the social worker. She removes obstacles out of her way; and her strength to get parents to better themselves is a plus. Parents come to school, seem responsible and very caring.*

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations were made by the program social workers and the school counselors to enhance the efficiency of what they strongly believe to be an effective program.

***Provision of more social workers to help reduce social worker case load***

The school counselors recommended that the four schools per social worker should be reduced because of the acuteness of the problems that many at risk students have. They indicated that it was sometimes difficult to determine which of the Level 3 students should be placed at Level 4, because of the fact that several Level 3 students needed the assistance of the social workers. Many students were therefore artificially kept out of the Level 4 group. In their opinion, one day a week per school was inadequate since the social worker had to work around the class schedule in order to meet with her students, and also make time for home visits. By decreasing the case load of the social worker, they felt that the social worker can increase their contact hours with the students. They therefore suggested that the program should be given more funding to facilitate the hiring of more social workers for the at-risk students.

***Provision of student incentives throughout the year***

The counselors and the social workers indicated a vital need for incentives that could be given to the students throughout the year, as they reached significant mileposts of their contracts. They expressed that the end of year reward system did not seem strong enough for some students to maintain or enhance their level of motivation. Incentives can include Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter gifts for the appropriate students.

***Program school administrators and staff should apply for program services***

The counselors and social workers recommended that school administrators should be informed about the program and be given the freedom to apply for participation in the program. They indicated that such an approach will increase the commitment, understanding, and cooperation of teachers and administrators whose campuses may benefit from any future expansion of the program.

***Provision of inservices for school personnel and social workers***

Workshops were recommended for the administrators and staff of each program school in order to enlighten them on the kind of collaborative framework that can facilitate the optimum realization of the goals of the program. They indicated that such inservices should include the social workers. Topics mentioned for some of the workshops include the following: multi-cultural awareness and issues, how to work effectively with the at-risk student, family violence, and how to recognize clinical indicators of drug abuse, child abuse, alcohol abuse, or students from dysfunctional homes. The social workers recommended that inservices should be organized for them to enlighten them on state guidelines for special education services in the elementary schools.

***Selection of Social Workers***

The school counselors and the social workers indicated that since the effectiveness of the program depends considerably on the qualities of the social worker, they suggested that the following qualities should be looked for when hiring any new social workers. They recommended that such persons should be thoroughly familiar with the culture of the particular group of at-risk students they will be working with; should share "control" with the parents and not be "pushy"; be patient, non-judgemental, prepared to expect anything in the homes of students without betraying their prejudices and emotions; should have some clinical experience, understand the school system; and have the flexibility to come down to the communication level that allows the parent to trust them.

## CONCLUSION

The educational research literature is replete with findings and observations that support the fact that poor academic performance is the single best predictor of students who drop out of school (Burchard et al, 1988, p.6). However, it is the manifestation of many psychological states such as the feeling of helplessness, lack of confidence in one's ability to achieve good grades, feelings of boredom, lack of interest in school, low self-esteem, and the perception of low teacher interest in one's well-being that often triggers the decision to drop out (Wehlage, Rutter, and Turnbaugh, 1987, Opuni et al, 1989). Many researchers have therefore indicated that schools can influence students' beliefs and attitudes about school as a vital first step (Wehlage et al,1987).

The academic achievement scores and attendance rates of the program students clearly support the belief of many educators that the academic deficiencies that lead to the high dropout rates in the secondary schools have their roots at the elementary level. If the decline in the academic performance of such at risk students is not eventually reversed by the district, then it could become the starting point of a trend that will reveal more pronounced academic deficiencies, as the students ascend the grade-level ladder; until the psychological states that trigger the decision to drop out, manifest themselves. Even though the program students' test scores and attendance rates did not indicate the expected

improvements, it should be mentioned that the program students (i.e. Level 4 students) were at a highest level of the At-Risk Pyramid (Level 4).

Overall, the findings show that the program was instrumental in having a considerable positive impact on the program students' self-esteem and attitude toward school. All the concurrent measures used to evaluate these affective domains have revealed the positive trends that are being seen in the lives of the program students. With such inroads being made in these affective areas, the program students seem to have now been equipped with the attitudinal foundations for overcoming the academic deficiencies.

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